



TAKING THE NEXT STEP

BEN CAJEE



This summer will see many of you from the alumni network graduate from school or university and embark upon the next step of your lives. For all but a lucky few, this will seem like one of the most daunting, confusing and unpredictable periods you could face, filled with uncertainty and doubt. In many ways these feelings are completely understandable; so much is being asked of you as you attempt to shape the future that is suddenly in your hands.

While this prospect may seem scary, you can take heart knowing that the next few years could also be some of the most exciting and inspiring of your life. The opportunities and possibilities that stretch before you are vast and diverse; you now have the freedom to go and explore everything you wanted, make mistakes, learn from them and discover who you really are. Now is the time for you to shape your future, so grab the opportunity with both hands. You, as Youth Sport Trust alumni, are more prepared for this next step than even you may know; you have shown commitment, leadership and a maturity beyond your years that will allow you to go out into the world and forge it into whatever you choose. So go out there with the knowledge and confidence that you are awesome and these next few years may be the most meaningful and momentous ever. Congratulations and good luck.

One person who remembers this time well is Ben Cajee; Ben left the Youth Sport Trust in 2004, having attended a Step into Sport camp as a Young Leader. He too found the period after education daunting, but refused to give up on his ambitions and is now a television presenter working for the BBC. He writes about his experiences and how he has got to where he is today.

Ben got involved with the Youth Sport Trust following a childhood that had heavily featured sport of all kinds. Having achieved an A* at GCSE PE, he continued his sporting development through a sports leadership course which earned him an invitation to Loughborough for the 2004 Step into Sport Camp. "I didn't really know what to expect, but I remember being pretty nervous on the train up from Exeter and even considered getting off at Taunton, giving my mum a call and asking her to come and pick me up! It was kind of like uni before uni – there were 400 people from all over the UK, you were out of your comfort zone and it was a little daunting. It turned out to be an incredible four days and the experiences have all come together in a way that I couldn't possibly have imagined at the time."

What Ben remembers most from that camp was what a lot of participants take away yet cannot really put into words. "It was amazing. A sense of unity, togetherness, fun, laughter and fullness that I can't really articulate in a way that would do it justice. It was special. It sounds so twee and clichéd, but you really can't explain that feeling. I remember the closing ceremony and everyone singing and celebrating together – it was like the crowd singing in unison at your favourite rock concert or footy fans singing together on the terraces – like you're in it together and you've bonded over something bigger than the actual event itself."

Once Ben left university he found himself in the same position that many graduates face. "It was a weird time. I loved uni so much so it was a massive celebration and such a brilliant few weeks with my mates. Once I'd packed up, left Cardiff and graduated though, it felt massively anti-climactic. I did a little bit of travelling with some mates but once I got back home to Mum and Dad, I didn't have a clue what I was going to do or where I was going to go."

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This uncertainty led Ben to embark on a number of different jobs and roles in a variety of fields, trying his hand at a host of pursuits: 'I travelled a little bit, worked in retail, cancer research, business development, freelance writing and editing, volunteered in the UK and Kenya, had an unsuccessful couple of days doing sales, temped in admin work, set up a website to help inspire young people and then landed my job at the International Cricket Council, which I did for three years, trying to increase participation in the game throughout Europe. I then applied for a pilot show on CBeebies and that snowballed pretty quickly, resulting in my job now!"



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Luckily, despite moving from role to role, Ben always had an idea of where he wanted to end up, a desire that kept driving him forward. "I knew that I wanted to work in the media, make a difference, help people and do something that I enjoyed, which hopefully centred round children or sport. I've been very lucky to get to a place where that's happened but it didn't come easy and there were lots of moments of doubt or uncertainty. I was never prepared to accept that it was a "pipe dream" and couldn't happen. It was probably going to be unlikely but I wasn't just going to take a job that I thought was okay and accept that was what I'd be doing for the next 20 years."

Such commitment to a dream is admirable and one that should be applauded, especially given the effort it has taken for Ben to get to where he is. When reflecting on his journey, many could view the different roles Ben has had as diversions or speed-bumps that slowed him down. Ben, however, is far more circumspect: "I don't regard any of the things I've done as being wasted, even the comparatively dull photocopying and clerical tasks to earn a bit of cash. It's all experience and it helps form your opinions and your outlook. I loved that week with the YST but I don't think that defined me. It was fun and an ace opportunity to have a great time and meet like-minded people. It led to an amazing trip to America, new friends and wonderful experiences, and those things have blossomed to this day. So in context, absolutely, it's been pretty great."

Ben's story is one that can give a great deal of hope and inspiration to those that are just about to embark on their working lives. It is easy to become overawed by the situation you find yourselves, but so long as you have the desire to reach your goals, anything is possible. We asked Ben to give a message to all new graduates; this is what he had to say:



“ I remember that time well and it can be really daunting, disconcerting and overwhelming. Things are about to change and that's kinda hard to get your head around or fully understand, but it's also exciting at the same time. There are endless possibilities and you've got a chance to get out there, strive for the things you want to do and hopefully have a really great time doing it. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something or that you've got to be realistic about your ambitions – unless you're talking about being better than Messi at footy and you can't kick a ball 5 yards – but do your best, keep pushing, and probably above all, be yourself. Have a belter!”